

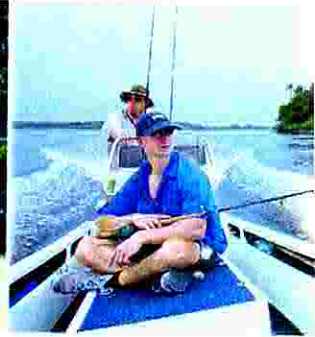
Surf, sand, sun and giant fish

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Surf, sand, sun, and giant fish

Henry Gilby visits Gabon, the heart of West Africa's sport-fishing paradise, where marine monsters line up to be caught on the fly

HAVE YOU ever heard of Gabon? Do you know much about the pulsating heart of the dark continent, or do the words "Central Africa" and their connotations simply scare you? Allow me to put your mind at ease, for there are no nightmares here. Instead I'll tell you about what might well be some of the best sport-fishing on this planet. Gabon is safe, easy to get to, not too expensive and crawling with fish and other fantastic wildlife – and if you move quickly you will be among the first visitors to witness this haven. How often do you get the chance to feel that real pioneering spirit with your fishing?

We arrive at Operation Loango's Loango Lodge where we are met with cool drinks and air-conditioned rooms, but like all travelling fishermen we have only one thing on our minds: when can we go fishing? Our guide Ed Truter knows the game, and within the hour we are in a boat racing up the channel towards the estuary mouth, where the tannin-stained lagoon mixes with the warm waters of the Atlantic. We moor the boat behind the beach, fling whatever gear we have over our shoulders, and head for a likely looking piece of shoreline.

I would hate to be a small fish anywhere near these waters. Flocks of birds smash into hapless prey all around us, and large predatory fish seem to take great delight in churning the sea into a foaming maelstrom as they gorge on their share. Surf breaks rhythmically upon the deserted shores as the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention; all the time I imagine the eyes of elephants, leopards and buffalo watching us from the forest behind, wondering what these mad white people are doing casting such small offerings at such large fish. The adrenalin is almost heart-stopping.

Ed wades out to chest height and takes a brave stance against the waves, casting a heavy diving lure right into the foam, and James sets up to cast a double-handed saltwater fly rod and monster imitation as far as he can. Large predators work the baitfish not 50yd away and the the odd fin circles menacingly around. Before I can wade out, Ed hooks a huge tarpon – 150lb plus – that leaps, runs and then nonchalantly throws busted hooks back at him in the way that only tarpon know how. I need to sit down and take stock here. Next cast and he hooks ►

Above from left Loango Lodge; a giant African threadfin caught on the fly; a herd of elephants makes its way into the forest; racing to the estuary mouth
Left James Warbrick-Smith with 100lb of African cabera snapper





Above, from left 4x4-ing it across the national park; a fly-caught cubera snapper; James and Ed Truter release a threadfin
 Left Ed makes his way farther out into the surf to cast a heavy diving lure into the Atlantic's foamy coastal waters

another fish that runs back at the beach; my shaking hands struggle to fire the camera shutter on a "small" African cubera snapper unceremoniously pulled from the surf, unhooked, and then released unharmed. And I'm not even fishing yet.

This quiet corner of Gabon is a kind of all-round fishing destination, well suited to anglers who want to try a bit of everything. My travelling companion James Warbrick-Smith worked hard at casting big flies in tricky surf and was rewarded with what must surely be one of the first giant African threadfins caught this way. This method of fishing is so untried that it is crying out for some serious effort. Large casting lures, jigs and spoons on powerful spinning tackle accounted for good numbers of cubera snappers and threadfin that try to make you hurt with their sheer power and turn of speed. Bait cast behind the breakers no doubt will produce lots of fish as well, but just how much fun is it to have waves breaking over your head as a fish positively nails your lure 20yd from your rod tip and makes your clutch scream like a deranged banshee?

That is a very brief summary of the beach fishing. What about the sport from the boat? This is where the fly-fishing really scored, as indeed did every other technique, but just how impressive is it to see 10-weight fly rods bend to such extraordinary angles? I have seen few places with the sport-fishing potential of this part of Gabon. Those who know tarpon know that the west coast of Africa has always held the biggest fish. If you want to catch a tarpon over 250lb, you want to start thinking about countries such as Angola, Sierra Leone and Gabon. Perhaps the real monsters are possible on the fly, but I personally would be happier with fairly substantial boat-fishing tackle.

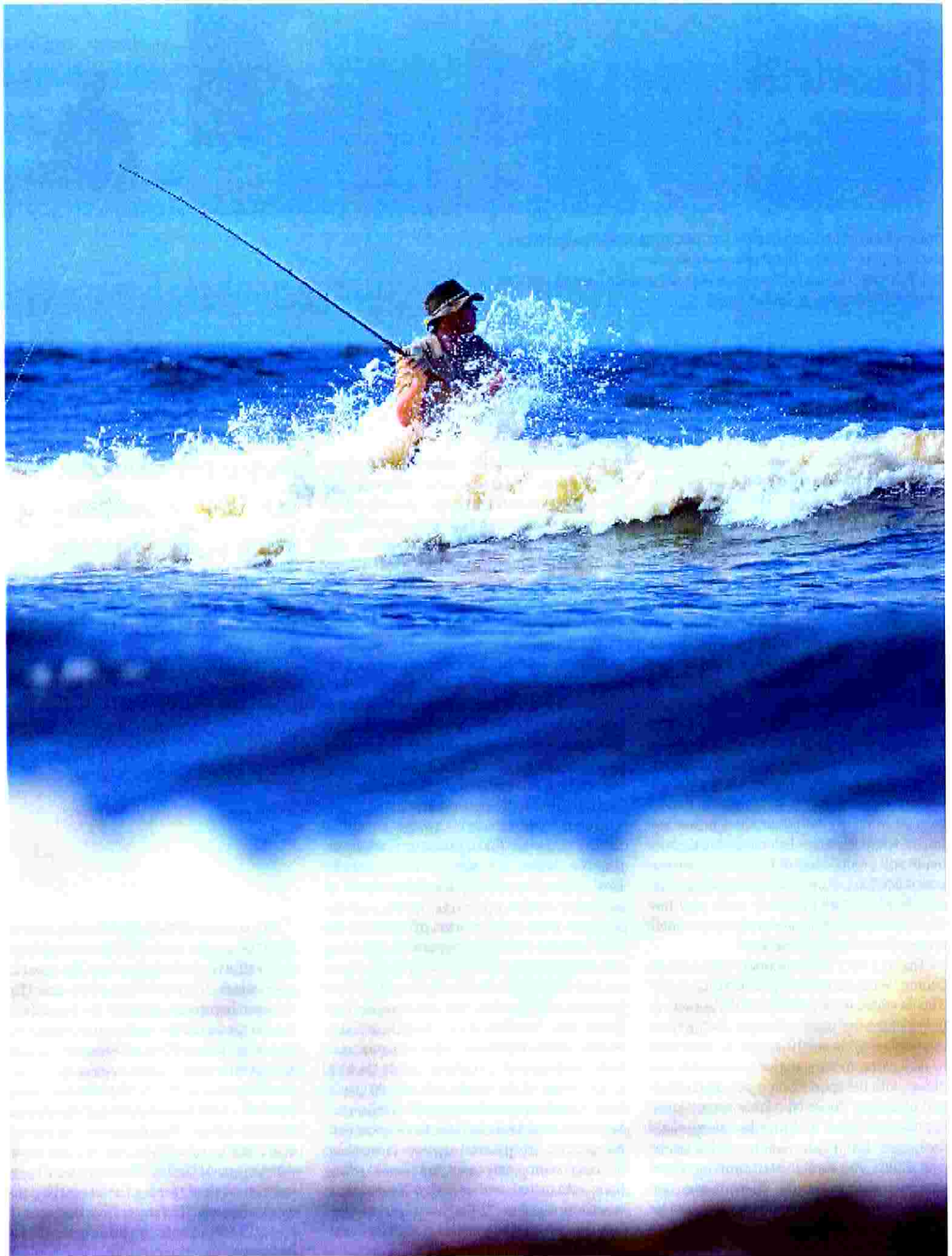
If the idea of trolling miles from land in a rough sea for hours and hours turns you off, then go to Gabon. Light tackle, lots of fly-fishing opportunities, fish of all sizes, either within the river mouth, inside the sheltered and very shallow lagoon or just outside it. No doubt there is much offshore fishing to explore, but that is for another time. I, for one, do not like endless hours spent trolling.

We decide to try and catch a large cubera snapper on live bait one balmy afternoon, but never did I guess that Ed would suggest anchoring in under two metres of water so close to the lagoon shore. James fly-fishes for the plentiful jacks that keep coming through in waves of ravenous hordes, but after my first drop down and one big snapper later, I offer him the live-bait rod. Could a fly-fisherman resist?

Lob the bait out and it swings around in the tide. Once the line tightens up, I adjust the drag for James, and then he really gets hit hard. There is no striking this fish because we are using exclusively circle hooks, but the predator then really storms off towards the shore and the waiting mangroves. A tight drag and skilful fishing from James prevents disaster, but 15 minutes into the battle and still we have not seen the fish. You can imagine how James and I looked when, sometime later, around 100lb of African cubera snapper suddenly surfaces next to the boat, neatly hooked in the corner of the mouth with the 8/0 circle hook. Gently we tow the majestic creature to a sandbank to revive it and take the required trophy pictures. My greatest memory is watching the beast swim gently away and James sitting there, exhausted, with a look of incredulous wonder on his face. "What have I just caught? How can fish that huge swim in such innocent-looking water?"

My greatest memory is watching the beast swim gently away and James, exhausted, with a look of wonder on his face. "What have I just caught? How can fish that huge swim in such innocent-looking water?"

We are both of the belief that big cuberas could be caught on the fly, but it would take some effort in both the surf and the quiet lagoon waters. No doubt it is achievable. The Guinean barracuda, possibly the largest barracuda species in the world, patrols these waters, as do potential record-breaking longfin and crevalle jacks. James even caught a couple of species on the fly that we have never heard of – even Ed had never seen the African longfish before. The enigmatic tarpon are often lurking somewhere, but we came away with the general feeling that much is still to be learnt about their feeding habits and day-to-day movements. The largest from the camp is around 260lb, caught by drifting dead baits just outside the estuary mouth. ▶



Right from top Knee-deep in surf; local connections are made by bush plane; buffalo are among the varied wildlife found in the Luongo National Park; the Guinean barracuda is possibly the largest in the world

The threadfin is a strange-looking fish, but how they fight. Happiest either in the surf zone or in the tumbling waters of the estuary mouth, they can grow very large and will happily nail most things: bait, lures, jigs and, of course, flies. James was one of the first people to spend time seriously fly-fishing in the area, and what he caught in the week was quite staggering. But how many times have you returned from a place knowing that you have hardly scratched the surface? It is certainly far removed from casting over flats for spooky bones or sight-fishing for wild browns, but just how special is it to, quite literally, stumble on a place that is as virgin, pristine and, simply, full of fish as Gabon's Atlantic coast?

But I would be doing the place a disservice if I spoke only of the fishing. As hard as it is to drag oneself away from the water, Operation Loango offers much more than wetting lines. Indeed, it has been set up to help protect the Loango National Park and fund all kinds of conservation projects by bringing tourists in. The forward-thinking government has decided to push eco-tourism as a means of promoting and aiding in the preservation of the area's incredible biodiversity.

The surrounding rainforest and open savannahs offer glimpses of a wonderful array of wildlife and it would be a real shame not to give yourself the opportunity to see central Africa as it is meant to be. There are forest elephants, buffalo, leopards, gorillas, chimps, incredible numbers of birds (some species totally unique to the area), hippos, crocs and more. The gentlest and quietest way to explore the area is to go on foot with a local guide or take to the kayaks and push into quiet, unspoilt waterways that team with forest sounds. Perhaps this works best for the angler who struggles to leave the fishing, but just to walk among such peace and near to such untamed wildness is very special.

Yet the fishing beckons once more. ■



Gabon details

Where I stayed Loango Lodge in Loango National Park is run by Operation Loango. For international bookings contact SCD BV Meander 251, 6825 MC Arnhem, The Netherlands, tel 00 31 26 370 5567, www.operation-loango.com.

Travel Travel from Heathrow to Paris to Libreville with Air France. For €260 you will be flown and driven to Loango Lodge from the Libreville airport and back again.

Fishing The price of a stay at Loango Lodge is approximately €260 per person per day, including meals and fishing. Drinks, fishing permits and tips are not included in the price. The best of the fishing is from September to April. All fishing methods are acceptable, but take your own tackle. Be prepared for some large and powerful fish, including tarpon, African cubera snapper, giant African threadfin, Guinean barracuda, big jacks, plus various smaller species in the mangroves. Operation Loango has a catch-and-release system; its website offers lots of useful fishing information.

Tackle Use 10- and 12-weight fly rods. For fly-fishing the surf specifically, look to the new generation of surf-specific double-handers, such as the Meiser S2H series, CND Atlantis and TFO Surf Launcher. Use 8-weight with a floating line for fun mangrove fishing. For virtually all other fishing – boat and heavy spinning from the beach – take something like a Shimano Calcutta



400 TE multiplier, loaded with 40 to 50lb braid, and a very powerful 7 to 8ft rod, such as the Daiwa Coastal, which is rated heavy. Rapala Shad Raps and huge poppers work well, as do various lead-head jigs. Take 6/0 and 8/0 circle hooks for live- and dead-bait fishing, and use ultra-strong and sharp trebles on your lures. Take the best fly reels you can: smooth drags, large diameter spools and corrosion



resistant. Be prepared for reels to be completely submerged while fishing the surf.

Fly lines Use floating line, intermediate line, fast sinker or T-14 or LC-13 shooting heads.

Flies For the bigger fish use 3/0 to 5/0 sizes – deceivers, Clouser minnows, sea habits, half 'n half, flashy profile flies, various poppers and sliders. Take some very large castable flies for fishing the surf such as oversize Silicodes and Conomo Specials, and some small flies for fishing the mangroves.

